

Special Studies and Evaluation

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Research Brief

High School Reform: Where Are We Now?

Background

In August 1992, the report of the California High School Task Force, Second to None: A Vision of the New California High School, was released. Second to None describes educational practices associated with six components of reform: creating curricular paths to success; developing powerful teaching and learning; establishing a comprehensive accountability and assessment system; providing comprehensive support for all students, including language minority and those at risk of failure; restructuring the school; and creating new professional roles.

Purposes of the Study

In fall 1997, the Office of Policy and Evaluation in conjunction with the Secondary Education Division surveyed nearly 300 high schools in California regarding the nature of their high school programs. The purposes of the survey were to assess the current status of high school education and reform in California and to assess changes over a three year period from 1994 to 1997.

The 1997 high school questionnaire was designed to reveal educator perceptions about practices described in *Second to None*. Additional items addressed high school graduation requirements and other areas. Two groups of high schools were surveyed: a) a statewide sample of high schools, and b) schools participating in the California High School Networks Project.

Findings

Educators in both the statewide sample of high schools and Network Project high schools are well versed in *Second to None*. Generally, schools reported placing a high priority on the educational practices described in *Second to None*. In most cases the

practices were judged to be of moderate to high priority in 1994 and remained at about the same levels in 1997.

Implementation of these educational reforms have increased over time. The greatest increases occurred in the area of curricular paths where both the statewide sample and the Network schools showed major increases in providing career paths and tech prep programs. Although schools have shown increased implementation of career paths, schools are still at lower levels of implementation of this component compared to other reform areas. The increased use of block scheduling was also evident from the responses.

Three items in the area of new professional roles for teachers were rated as a high priority and were at moderate to high levels of implementation. These are:

- Teachers serve as leaders in developing curriculum standards and assessments.
- Teachers lead/facilitate major school reform efforts at this school.
- Teachers regularly provide professional development to other teachers via direct training, mentoring, or coaching.

All of the teaching and learning items were rated as a high priority by at least 60 percent of the schools. Three items were of relatively high priority but were at somewhat lower levels of implementation. These are:

- Students regularly use technology for in-depth study.
- The school provides a systemic program to improve the literacy skills of students who are reading well below grade level.
- Students routinely use a variety of resources for learning and engage in learning experiences beyond the textbook and the classroom.

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Given their high priority, these items are areas where schools may focus in the future.

Most of the schools indicated that the items relating to student support were of high priority to them and were either moderately or fully implemented. The highest ratings were made for three items.

- There is a systemic effort to prepare all students, especially those from backgrounds under represented in higher education, to take courses that will prepare them for postsecondary education.
- Academic support services are provided to help all students meet content and performance standards.
- The school is connected to community health and counseling services and other youth-serving organizations that support student learning.

In 1994, seven specific areas were identified as being priorities for reform given their relatively high priority ratings and their relatively low levels of implementation. Of these items the two that showed the smallest implementation gains related to students being divided into clusters which share a team of teachers, and teachers being grouped into interdisci-

plinary teams which share a common preparation time.

The other identified items showed large gains, as was expected. Students have increased options for program majors; they are working on applied projects; instruction is taking place in longer blocks of time; and courses are integrated across disciplines.

California high schools are expecting to increase their high school graduation requirements in the areas of requiring 2 years of math, including algebra and geometry. Currently only 54 percent of high schools have this requirement, with 70 percent indicating that they will have such a requirement for the class of 2004. Currently about 80 percent of high schools require 4 years of English and 85 percent require 2 years of laboratory science. If all students are to pass a rigorous exit exam, the percent of students taking these courses, whether required as graduation criteria or not, may need to be increased. The percent of schools requiring senior projects or community service will increase dramatically for the Class of 2004.

This Research Brief was prepared by Cathy George of the Office of Policy and Evaluation. For more information, contact Cathy George at (916) 657-4319 or cgeorge@cde.ca.gov. This Research Brief may also be found on the Internet at <www.cde.ca.gov/ftpbranch/ope/sse>.

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